



Open Letter: Demand for Accountability and Transformation from Thenmozhi Soundararajan

Demand Accountability <openletteranddemand@gmail.com>

Thu, May 25, 2023 at 10:48 AM

Open Letter: Demand for Accountability and Transformation from Thenmozhi Soundararajan

These words have been long overdue now. The cost of putting them down on paper has, is, and always will be too much. Fear of paying the potential cost—individually, communally, or as a movement—has kept me/us in the closet, as I/we cried our pain in whispers that may seem far and widespread. Especially now as so many of us in the closet are stumbling upon each other and finally seeing and being seen for our survivorship, I am taking power from our whispers and claiming our voice. For too long, I have told myself various stories to soothe my anxieties, fears, and guilt that both have resulted from and upheld my silence and complicity. However, as a survivor and witness of abuse, manipulation, exploitation, and harm, I am now finally claiming and practicing courage—both for myself, for others who similarly are suffocating in silence, and others to come. To put these words finally to paper is my moral and ethical responsibility, and I am deeply sorry that I did not write this sooner.

I also want to preface that these words come from a place of love and hope. I write this as an invitation for us collectively as communities and movement lovers, listeners, laborers, and leaders to raise certain questions that should have long been raised. I write this demand for accountability in hopes that such a demand pushes us towards transformation even when it may feel uncomfortable and uneasy, and even when we may not want to be moved. I write this with love for our communities, our histories, our movements, and our resistances—all of which are not, and can't be defined, claimed, monopolized, and limited by just a single person or a single organization.

In this moment, as the caste protections movement gains momentum across the country, with Seattle and California to become the first city and state (respectively) to add caste as a protected category, I want to expose the abuse, manipulation, exploitation, and harm that has continuously gone unchecked and without accountability in our movement for years. As an organizer in the anti-caste movement for years now, I have both witnessed and been a recipient of this harm on the part of Thenmozhi Soundararajan, Executive Director of Equality Labs.

Thenmozhi Soundararajan has claimed herself as the voice of Dalit feminism, and has emerged as one of the lead—and too often, the *only*—authority voice championing the anti-caste movement in the United States. However, such a monopolizing claim has come at the cost of appropriating and stealing work without due credit; exploiting labor; overworking and underpaying or overworking without compensation, credit, and recognition; erasing and disposing; and gaslighting, manipulating, silencing many Dalit and caste oppressed women, queer and trans peoples, worker class peoples, and young peoples.

So many of us are survivors already who came to the movement to find a place of refuge and sanctuary from the violences, and placed our trust in Thenmozhi Soundararajan, but have then been disappointed, harmed, traumatized, pushed out, and disposed of without any accountability. One merely needs to look at the very high turnover rate in Equality Labs to realize that Thenmozhi Soundararajan has not been invested in mentoring, cultivating, and sustaining leaders outside herself.

I have stayed silent after resigning from Equality Labs, but have continued to witness young organizers being recruited, exploited, burnt out, and disposed of within the matter of months. And more recently, as I have come across and spoken with too many of them—all of whom continue to walk with much exhaustion and trauma and echo very similar experiences to my own of continuously being gaslit, lied to, manipulated, and exploited by Thenmozhi—I felt it was my moral and ethical responsibility to finally speak out publicly. On behalf of so many—*too many*—of us, I issue this call for transformation, and demand movement leaders, lovers, listeners, and laborers in and beyond the anti-caste movement, as well as partner and coalitional organizational leaders to **1) hold Thenmozhi Soundararajan accountable; 2) support the survivors who have, and are continuing to be harmed; 3) honor the work of those whose labor has built and sustained the movement, especially the unseen, unnamed, and unrecognized Dalit and caste oppressed organizers; and 4) reassess where our collective movement for caste abolition has come to.**

I, and so many of us, have held back from speaking out publicly in fear that calling in Thenmozhi Soundararajan and Equality Labs will hurt the anti-caste movement. Nobody can deny the invaluable contributions and the tireless work that Thenmozhi Soundararajan has put into bringing the movement to where it currently is. Having worked with Thenmozhi at one point, I can't deny my own learning and growth that is owed to Thenmozhi. It is for this reason that I still have hope for Thenmozhi to be able to enter the conversation with humility, take ownership for the harm she has knowingly and consciously enacted, and commit to practicing and modeling transformation.

It is important for us all to always remember that one person or one organization can't be the whole movement. Thenmozhi's harm has gone unchecked and without accountability because so many peoples, especially fellow oppressor caste peoples, have placed Thenmozhi up on a pedestal, and Thenmozhi also has continued to take advantage of that. If Thenmozhi has been the enactor of harm, she does not bear the sole responsibility, as the responsibility rests with so many of us who have created, been complicit in, and allowed for such conditions under which harm has been ongoing without accountability for years. The fact is that I am not just demanding accountability from Thenmozhi Soundararajan, but my demand for accountability is also directed at all those (but especially movement and organizational leaders committed to social justice) who have known about Thenmozhi Soundararajan's harm but not taken any action; and those of us (and especially savarna and oppressor caste peoples) who placed Thenmozhi Soundararajan on a pedestal and accepted her as the *sole* representative for all Dalit women or Dalit and caste oppressed communities at large; or those of us who accepted Thenmozhi Soundararajan and Equality Labs as the whole movement itself.

It is true that so many of us come to movement spaces looking for a sanctuary and refuge from violence. The anti-caste movement is so necessary and urgent—and requires that as we build a movement not just for caste equity, but also for caste abolition and annihilation, we can hold close the questions raised in this letter about our responsibility and accountability to each other, and Dalit and caste oppressed communities, in all of the multiplicities and diversities which must not be reduced down to an individual.

Gratitude owed to the labor and courage of Sahim, and all the named and unnamed survivors harmed by the organization Black and Pink, whose call-in of Black and Pink leadership for accountability and transformation inspired and served as a model to write this letter.

<https://medium.com/@demandforaccountability/open-letter-demand-for-accountability-and-transformation-from-thenmozhi-soundararajan-6b50f16aef96>